Operational Decision Support Defined

Operational decision support is what the Intelligence function is all about. Your job is to make sure everyone is well informed about what is happening, as well as what is expected to happen. In a busy season, competition for resources is intense, and numerous requests for airtankers, crews, engines and overhead go unfilled. Providing timely, accurate information to decision makers is the key to getting the resources to where they can do the most good.

We touched on operational decision support in Unit 1, but now let's talk about it in a little more depth. First of all, what kinds of things are we talking about when we say "operational decisions"? Here are some examples of the decisions to be made, along with some of the information needed to support them:

1.   Which fires/incidents do I assign the resources to?

    A.   What are the priorities (refer to National Mobilization Guide, Section 11.2)?
            1)   Human life?
            2)   Property and resource values?
    B.   Where will the resources be most effective (control the fire faster at the least cost)?
    C.   Are there considerations (such as access, terrain, fire behavior) that will affect the tactics and/or resources that can be used?
    D.   Do we need to make a show of force for political, social, or economic reasons, even though the additional resources may not make a difference?
    E.   How long have the current resources been committed, and how soon will they need to be replaced?

2.   How many and what kinds of resources (crews, engines, aircraft, radio equipment, IMT(s)) do I need to keep in reserve or pre-position? Do I need to extend staffing (extra hours, standby or work days off) for my regular unit resources? Do I need to request severity funding? Should we activate resources (such as airtankers) early or extend them at the end of the season? Do we need to set up staging area(s) and/or a Mobilization Center?

    A.   What is our potential for multiple or large fires?
            1)   What are the fuel conditions (WIMS/NFDRS/Fire Family +)?
            2)   What is the likelihood of new ignitions (human or lightning)?
    B.   What is the short and long-range forecast?
    C.   How readily available are resources (if I don't order them now, will I be able to get them later)?
    D.   How many resources will be available for reassignment in the next day or two?
    E.   If I bring in more resources, do we have the people to brief them, dispatch them, support them, and provide for their safety?

3. Do I need to look at activating the military (MAFFs or crews)?

    A. Do we have the people available as MCADs (Military Crew Advisors) to go with them?

    B. Each Battalion has to be kept together - can the incident use 25 additional crews and is the command structure adequate to manage them?

    C. Do we have adequate sites to set up a separate camp? The National Guard will handle logistical support, but since they use AD employees we will need to have Fire Business people who can process the payment documents, as well as deal with rental buses, etc.

    D. Can our Expanded Dispatch(es) handle this workload?

    E. Since we need to plan 2 weeks ahead (in order to allow for 40 hrs. of training prior to mobilization), will we still need them by the time they get to the incident?

Target Audience

The types of decisions we just discussed can be made at the local, geographic area, or national level. The people making these decisions can include any or all of the following:

- ❏ Fire Management Officers (FMOs)
- ❏ Aviation Managers
- ❏ Agency Fire and Aviation Directors
- ❏ Dispatch Center Managers and GA/NICC Coordinators
- ❏ Dispatchers
- ❏ Caches (Supplies and Radio Support)
- ❏ Incident Commanders (all types)
- ❏ MAC Groups

Sources of Information

In most cases, information requirements have already been identified in the office's Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). As we discussed in Unit 1, the information needed to make these decisions is gathered and distributed via the following standard reporting products:

- ❏ ICS-209(s)
- ❏ Fire Information/News Releases
- ❏ WFSA(s)
- ❏ Incident Action Plans & Maps
- ❏ Situation Reports (national program as well as local/GACC custom products (e.g., SIT300))
- ❏ Fuels and Weather Data (from RAWS, WIMS, and NFDRS)

❏   Resource Status Information (ROSS)
❏   Written Briefings (Daily, Weekly, Monthly)

You are also likely to receive special requests for other information from these same customers, as well as the agency external affairs staff or media representatives. These requests usually involve some sort of statistical summary of resource utilization and/or fire occurrence.

MAC Group Operations

Aside from your Dispatch Center Manager/GA Coordinator, of the customers listed above, you will have the most direct involvement with the MAC Group Coordinator. MAC Groups are comprised of agency fire managers and are generally activated when the fire situation and resource availability reaches critical levels (generally at Preparedness Level 4 and 5). They can function at any and all levels of the system (local, geographic area, and national). When a MAC Group is activated, a MAC Coordinator will be designated with the following responsibilities:

1. Coordinate with the Intelligence Specialist/Coordinator to assure that required information is being provided to the MAC Group within the time frames specified.

2. Arrange for and manage the facilities and equipment necessary to carry out the MAC Group functions.

3. Assist the MAC Group decision process by facilitating the group's conference calls and/or meetings.

4. Document the MAC Group's decisions and coordinate with Center Managers (if the Center Manager/MAC Coordinator functions have been separated) to assure their prompt implementation.

The Intelligence Section will expand as needed to support the geographic area MAC Group's requirements that situation, resource status, and fire behavior information is accurate and current. This may involve splitting the function into separate Situation, Resource and Fire Behavior Units under the Intelligence Specialist/Coordinators' direction, or bringing in additional personnel within the existing organization.

In order to ensure that consistent information is being distributed, it is generally preferred that all information be collected via existing dispatch/coordination channels by the Intelligence Section, and given to the MAC Coordinator for consolidation and presentation to the MAC Group. Unless constrained by extremely tight time frames, any requests for information in addition to the required products listed below will flow back down through the MAC Coordinator to the Intelligence Section for collection. Conversely, the MAC Group will keep the Intelligence Section informed of any individually collected information.

Depending on complexity, the MAC Coordinator will assess the need to assign an Information Officer, GIS Specialists, and/or technical advisors such as a Meteorologist, Planning Section Chief, Aviation Operations Specialist, etc. to the MAC Support Organization.

The MAC Coordinator will generally sort through the information received from the incidents and rank them in order of priority for presentation to and concurrence by the group. In most cases, the primary documents used for this process are the ICS-209 and WFSA. Using some form of decision matrix (similar to the Great Basin Matrix - Handout), each incident is awarded a certain number of points based on the various criteria. The points are totaled and used to rank the incidents, with the highest total receiving the highest priority.

Exercise - To understand how the matrix/priority ranking process works, use the matrix, ICS-209s and WFSAs to rank three different incidents. Discuss your results with others in your group. Did you all agree on your top priority incident? Did the quality of the ICS-209/WFSA affect the outcome?